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EPA plans to get to work next summer on West Side Soils

By: Susan Dunlap, 10/17/17

Work begins in Butte's amorphous West Side Soils section of Superfund next summer, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

West Side Soils is vaguely considered to be both to the west of Butte's Uptown, as well as in the Flat, which is southeast of Uptown. The work to investigate the extent of contamination in West Side Soils will get going in June 2018, EPA officials said via an email to The Montana Standard earlier this week.

An internal report last month criticized the lack of adequate staffing on Superfund sites across the nation and specifically pointed to Butte's West Side Soils. The report said that because the area had never been investigated, the potential health impacts from the contamination are unknown.

The report, produced by EPA's Office of the Inspector General, cited the lack of staffing to handle the workload for the nation's more than 1,000 Superfund sites. Even as EPA begins to prepare to investigate the contamination in West Side Soils — 34 years after declaring Butte and Silver Bow Creek a Superfund site — EPA doesn't yet have a project manager assigned to the task.

EPA says a project manager will be named before the investigation begins next summer. Currently, Nikia Greene oversees most of the Silver Bow Creek/Butte Superfund site — an area of about 30 miles that includes seven separate sections.

Other questions, such as the boundaries of West Side Soils, as well as who the responsible party or parties are, are also questions EPA can't answer after 34 years of declaring Butte and Silver Bow Creek a Superfund site.

That could begin to change now that EPA is getting going on the work. But the investigation is a long process, retired DEQ project manager Joe Griffin told The Standard Tuesday.

"It varies by how complex it is," Griffin said.

EPA's investigation on the Butte Hill took close to 13 years, Griffin said.

While the investigative work is ongoing, EPA will begin reviewing historical documents and launch into a separate inquiry into finding and naming the responsible parties. Atlantic Richfield is the responsible party for the rest of the Silver Bow Creek/Butte Superfund site, as well as for Anaconda's Superfund site west of Butte.

The work will involve sampling soil, ground water and the area's creeks. EPA said Blacktail Creek east of the Lexington Avenue bridge — the current boundary for the Butte Hill section of Butte's Superfund — may get sampled. But until a work plan is in place, EPA can't confirm that.

The agency is also now considering extending the Residential Metals Abatement Program — known by its acronym RMAP — into West Side Soils. Funded by Atlantic Richfield, the program allows the county to test and clean residents' attics and yards on the Butte Hill.

If a homeowner living outside of the Butte Hill boundary is planning to remodel a home, he or she can contact the county and get the attic tested.

If the attic is “hot” — meaning lead or arsenic is present and exceeds the cleanup standards for Butte — then the county will remove the heavy metals from the homeowner’s attic.

But for people who live in West Side Soils, the county can’t test the soil to see if heavy metals are in their yards. EPA provided no time line as to when the agency will make a decision on the possibility of expanding the metal abatement program in West Side Soils.

EPA will seek access agreements for soil sampling. The Flat is one of the more heavily populated areas of Butte. There are also private property owners to the west of the Butte Hill.

DEQ confirmed EPA is expected to begin the work but said that until that commences, DEQ will not name their own site manager to the project. DEQ works as the support agency to EPA cleanup oversight on Butte’s Superfund.

Butte-Silver Bow Commissioner Jim Fisher submitted a request to B-SB Chief Executive Dave Palmer last week to reach out to “ranking representatives” of EPA to appear before the council to answer questions on West Side Soils. Fisher’s memo expresses concern that EPA has been “nonresponsive,” on West Side Soils.

“We deserve an explanation and apparently need to demand a response,” his memo states.

The commission will consider Fisher's request at Wednesday's Council of Commission meeting.

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